Lynch / Rivette. Love Me Tender: “Wild at Heart” and “L’amour fou”

Comparing a film by David Lynch with one by Jacques Rivette, paired by a new retrospective series in New York.

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This article accompanies the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s dual retrospective of the films of Jacques Rivette and David Lynch and is part of an ongoing review of Rivette’s films for the Notebook*, in light of several major re-releases of his work.*

Amour fou, in Lynch’s *Wild at Heart*, Rivette’s *L’amour fou*, is a pretext for the theatrical. Only in Lynch’s very romantic Palme d’Or winner do the shifts between and coalesces of plastic (the stage) and interior life (the love affair) lead to a union of any kind; when Sailor (Nicolas Cage) mounts the hood of his sweetheart’s Cadillac and serenades her with “Love Me Tender,” the superficiality of the reference to badboy Elvis Presley movies achieves a sort of extradimensional poignancy: the characters live in a plastic world, of *Wizard of Oz* witches, barroom brawls, lipstick-smeared killer moms, Texas hitmen, and middle of nowhere, beer-supping hillbillies, so it’s suitable that their reunion and redemption might too be plastic. By this point, the dimestore paperback plot, along with the coterie of bullish antagonists and crack-pot bit players, have been enveloped by the swirl of Sailor and Lula’s (Laura Dern) wild affair. The blood-stained, desert-town robbery—dog skipping away with banker’s hand, amputated by a shotgun blast—that constitutes *Wild at Heart*’s sort-of conclusion is rendered almost insignificant by a title card that announces a leap forward in years of diegetic action. What matters more than the robbery itself—contrary to the fealty otherwise shown by Lynch to the movie’s genre trappings, if not outright plot mechanics—is the sudden realisation that the feelings just below the surface of things (and it’s all surface until that point) might not simply be real but also deep, obsessive—and plausibly more lasting, more worthwhile than their turbulent, naive romance might first suggest.





L'amour fou works in quite the opposite way, if from the same essential theme: a love affair, pitched somewhere in the mire of an extended theatre rehearsal—where both libidinal and artistic energies intersect—somehow ends in desolation. It's as if Rivette were suggesting that one begets the other, and that as the rehearsals disintegrate, the play itself never realised, the lives lived around the play, as in *Paris Belongs to Us* (1961), *Out 1* (1971), and *Around a Small Mountain* (2009), might too suffer the same fate. Bulle Ogier's Claire records the radio, and her own heavy breathing, and the traffic whooshing by anonymously outside, as if to reclaim some of the artistic energy she displaced by leaving the theatre troupe. Jean-Pierre Kalfon's Sebastien stares at his reflection in a

shop window, like Cage peering up at his face blurrily bifurcated by a ceiling mirror in *Wild at Heart*, and can see only two: his own reflection as some kind of stand-in for a missing Claire. *L'amour fou*'s final shot, as brilliantly obvious as anything that would be later imagined by Lynch, posits a bow to the theatre, echoing the opening shot's rise from the whiteness of the stage floor, as gesturing towards the stagey qualities of the relationship itself. The energies of creation and sex are mutually recurring, and both extinguish with the dissolution of the affair.[1]

1. Still, it's worth noting that *Wild at Heart*, with its two-second cutaways, experimental fade work, chintzy costumes worn with no self-consciousness, and the expert stalking-through-widescreen-frames by the players, might make it a more obvious partner to Rivette's 1976 *Noroît (une vengeance)*. Likewise, the amateurish cutaways to the house-fire that claimed the life of Lula's father come from the same place as the equally-subversive cutaways of the moon in *Duelle (une quarantaine)* (also 1976)—but I suppose there's also the distant possibility that Lynch might've intended these moments of slapdash brilliance as a veiled homage to any one of Rivette's diegesis-busting, inspired, amateurish editing rhythms.